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SUBJECT: KUWAIT HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS CENTER SCHEDULED TO CLOSE IN MARCH

1. (U) SUMMARY: Ambassador met with Lieutenant General Ali Al-Mumin (ret), Chief of the Humanitarian Operations Center (HOC), at the HOC's facilities on March 13, 2005. Al-Mumin described the accomplishments made by the HOC over the past two years, the disbursement of \$5 million USD that Kuwait has donated to Najaf, and the impact that closing the HOC would have on the United Nations, United States, Kuwait and Iraq. Ambassador subsequently spoke to the Undersecretary of the Foreign Ministry to recommend once again extending the life of the HOC. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) On March 13, 2005, Ambassador met with LTG Ali Al-Mumin (ret), Chief of the HOC, and US military officers assigned to the HOC to discuss the HOC's operations. Al-Mumin began by explaining that the HOC has been operational since January 2003 and falls under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). He described the purpose of the HOC as: facilitating the transfer of donated humanitarian aid from NGOs, military, and governments through Kuwait to Iraq. He added that the HOC also helps identify needs in Iraq and matches those needs with willing donors. According to Al-Mumin, over the past two years the HOC has arranged for the transportation of everything from heaters and bedding to medical supplies and temporary shelters.

3. (U) Five million dollars of Kuwait's pledged aid has been earmarked for distribution to Najaf through the HOC, Al-Mumin said. He explained that the money for Najaf has been split into two separate funds. The first \$2 million was used for cash grants, foodstuffs, heaters and other small items. The remaining \$3 million is being used to build housing. The plan, he continued, is to allow the displaced children (and others) to remain in these houses until they are of age (21) and able to support themselves. Once this happens, they must leave the house so that another needy family can move in.

4. (U) Al-Mumin went on to say that distributing the money in Iraq has not been easy. His preferred method of disbursement was to give the money directly to the local government in Najaf, reasoning that they are better able to identify the most needy projects in their town. However, he said, during one of his trips to the area he heard complaints that the money was not going to the right charities and that preference was being given to those with connections to government officials. He concluded by saying that "corruption" is a real concern in Iraq and that he has had to closely monitor the distribution of the \$5 million in Najaf and has traveled to Najaf on three occasions to check on the program.

5. (U) According to the original charter for the HOC, its scheduled closure date was over a year ago. Since then the HOC has received 3-month extensions, the last of which, Al-Mumin confirmed, is scheduled to expire on March 31, 2005, effectively closing the HOC permanently. Al-Mumin said that he will speak with MFA Undersecretary Khalid Al-Jarallah about another extension, but admits that he is frustrated with receiving only 3-month extensions. This time, he plans to ask for a longer extension, preferably one that extends the HOC's operations to December 2005.

6. (U) If the HOC closes, Al-Mumin explained, the burden of facilitating donations to Iraq would fall on the individual ministries. As an example, he said medical supplies would need to be sent through the Ministry of Health and educational funds and materials sent through the Ministry of Education. Right now, he said, the HOC takes care of coordinating everything with the ministries, the NGOs and the governments. He also added that the United Nations may be expected to start handling some of the humanitarian aid, a job that he does not feel they are prepared to take on at this time. He was also particularly concerned about replicating the HOC's role vis-a-vis Iraqi refugees who find themselves in Kuwait.

7. (U) The Ambassador praised the work that the HOC has accomplished over the past two years and told Al-Mumin that the HOC should be used as a model for future post-conflict humanitarian aid programs.

8. (U) COMMENT: The HOC is a useful and integral component to Kuwait's assistance program for Iraq. Closing it now would be premature, send the wrong message, and complicate the GOK's program of aid to Iraq. On March 8, Embassy, in coordination with US military forces in Kuwait, sent a

diplomatic note requesting that the GOK continue support for the HOC. The Ambassador also raised this issue with MFA Undersecretary Al-Jarallah on March 14. U/S Al-Jarallah indicated that another extension might be considered. He noted, however, that the GOK is also working with the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) office in Kuwait to assume the HOC's responsibilities should the HOC close, as scheduled, on March 31, 2005. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Baghdad minimized considered.
LEBARON